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A Watch On The CIA

The Central Intelligence Agency, alone of all federal agencies, has not once been subjected to formal review by members of Congress. The closest thing to such a review—and it is not very close—is the informal watch kept on CIA operations by a special subcommittee composed of Appropriations and Armed Services Committee members.

The Central Intelligence Agency has, in short, been in large measure a law unto itself during its almost 20 years of existence. In recent years there have been rising fears that the CIA, operating virtually without congressional supervision, has gone far beyond its intelligence-gathering function. The arguments for supervision considerably outweigh the counter-argument that anything more than casual scrutiny would undermine the CIA because of the secretive nature of its operations.

Two proposals just made in the Senate have refocused attention on this matter. Sen. Eugene J. McCarthy seeks creation of a special Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee to study the impact of CIA activities on United States relations with other countries. Sen. Stephen M. Young proposes establishment of a permanent joint committee of Senate and House to oversee operations of the CIA.

Senator Young said this: "Wrapped in its cloak of secrecy, the CIA has in effect been making foreign policy. In so doing, it has assumed responsibilities which were heretofore solely those of the President and Congress." Senator McCarthy said that because there has been no formal review of the CIA "it has not been possible to determine whether a valid basis exists for criticism of the agency, or to prevent what appear to be distortions of policy or to dispel rumors surrounding the activities of the CIA." These are cogent points. A thoroughgoing study and establishment of a supervisory setup, both handled with discretion, would be much in the public interest.